

Pam. Biog.

# A Modern St. Francis

Being a Brief Record of the

Life and Labors of the Rev.

CHARLES CALEB PEIRCE

Of El Dorado County, California

By the Right Reverend

WILLIAM H. MORELAND, D.D.

Bishop of Sacramento



EL DORADO, A CALIFORNIA MINING TOWN

## A Modern St. Francis

BY THE RIGHT REVEREND WILLIAM H. MORELAND, D.D., BISHOP OF SACRAMENTO

THE Rev. Charles Caleb Peirce, presbyter, who fell asleep at Placerville, El Dorado county, California, March 14th, 1903, was a striking personality. As a hero of the mission field, as a man of rare self-sacrifice, as a character of rugged strength and spirituality, as a Christian pastor, his career is highly instructive, and reflects glory upon the American Church. For forty-two years this man labored and served in one place, and that a rough, sparsely settled, obscure corner of the United States. Although without private means, he refused to receive a salary, believing that the people whom he served would provide for him in health and sickness and in the hour of death. His title was rector of the Church of the Saviour, Placerville, which he built in pioneer days at large expense, raising much of the money himself, but his parish was the entire county of El Dorado, over which he tramped week by week, until he was a familiar and beloved figure in every hamlet, mining camp and farmhouse within its limits.

Sundays he spent serving the parish church, but invariably on Monday mornings he set out on his walks over the dusty highways and mountain roads, bearing a heavy pack of sacred writings which he gave away. He gathered neighborhoods in farm kitchens and school-houses where by candle-light this graduate of the General Theological Seminary, learned in the Hebrew and Greek Bible, expounded Scripture to the country people, afterward presenting each one with a copy of the book under review. He carried about successively all the principal books of the Old and New Testaments, each being separately bound, and each in turn he carefully explained, until he had taken his hearers through the Bible and had presented them with a consecutive library of the sacred writings. He excited curiosity and interest in the almost unknown contents of Holy Scripture by announcing true but striking and fanciful titles to his Bible readings. "The Brave Heart in Prison" would prove to be an introduction to the Epistle to the Philip-pians. "Letter of the Dying Hero" was



the phrase whereby he secured a hearing for II. Timothy. He would bring out and apply some of the richness of the selected Scripture, simply to whet the appetite for more, then place the book itself in the hand of each hearer, urging a completer study at home. In this way he sowed the seeds of eternal life, which on subsequent visits he found ripening and bearing fruit.

In scattered rural communities and

appeared the people were awaiting him with glad anticipation. Every house in the county was his home. At noon or in the evenings when he would turn in to rest, a plate would be set for him at any table and a bed found ready under any roof. He could sleep in the hay or under the trees, if need be, but there was not a farmer or housewife in the land who did not feel honored to shelter this man of God.



*Monday morning: Ready for  
the week's tramp*

*Sunday morning: Ready for  
the church service*

THE REV. CHARLES C. PEIRCE

along country sides where human habitations were few and widely separated he went with his store of Divine knowledge, evangelizing a people who were wholly without settled pastors and beyond the reach of a parochial system. Being unmarried and of vigorous health, he was able to spend six days of every week in walking over the county, averaging sixty miles from Monday to Saturday, announcing in advance the circuit of his journeys, so that wherever he

His parish records show a remarkable ministry. He baptized 772 individuals, married 597 couples, officiated at 1,385 burials, and this among a scant and widely scattered population. His custom was to preach at weddings, christenings and funerals, believing that he ought to let no opportunity pass to tell the people of Christ, especially where so few had the chance to attend church. He saw children whom he baptized grow to maturity, and was often



called on to baptize their children, and children's children. He performed offices of the Church for three and even four generations in the same family. His charity was unbounded, involving at times self-inflicted suffering and privation. Distress or poverty among those he met appealed to him so strongly that he would share even his wearing apparel with an entire stranger who seemed to need it more than himself. The chief anxiety of his friends was lest he should give away his effects faster than they could supply him.

It is easy to understand how such a life as this, continued in simple unconscious heroism for forty-two years, made the man almost the idol of his people.

Other ministers came and went, "Father Peirce" stayed on. It was enough for him to be the servant of Christ to a whole county. He gladly accepted this as his life work and it was his boast before life closed that only twice had he been outside the county limits—and then against his will.

When such a ministry as this came to its close great and spontaneous was the outpouring of a people's grief. Far and wide through the country flashed the news, "'Father Peirce' is dead." On the day of his funeral the roads were lined with vehicles of every description, bringing people to the county seat. The Mayor of Placerville issued a proclamation calling on the schools and stores

to close. There was complete cessation of business. The windows displayed the portrait of the dead pastor draped in black. Even the saloons were locked, and bore on their glass doors the words, "Closed on account of the funeral of Brother Peirce." The people stood about in groups discussing a life which inspired them with awe as of something supernatural. The body, robed in his vestments, lay in the church, and for two

days many hundreds came to look upon it. It was pathetic to see among the crowds, the waifs and strays of humanity, men whose bleared eyes and sorry dress spoke too plainly of the sad infirmity which had overcome them. Peirce had been their friend. No one had sunk too low



"ALONG COUNTRY SIDES WHERE HUMAN HABITATIONS WERE FEW"

to lose his sympathy or lack his helping hand. The solid men of the county, including its officers, administrators, miners, laborers, marched to his grave. The Board of Education, of which he had been a member for forty years, with teachers and pupils, were witnessing to the public loss. The newspaper issued an extra supplement with his portrait and a poem from a local source, entitled "Come, El Dorado, and Bury Your Dead." The Bishop, at Father Peirce's last request, preached a funeral sermon and read the solemn offices of the Church.

Not often when an "Episcopal minister" dies is the blow felt in every household, the public business suspended and





THE CHURCH OF OUR SAVIOUR, PLACERVILLE

every inhabitant impressed with the feeling that a general calamity has occurred. Allowance must be made for the appeal to popular imagination of such a life as Peirce's. Doubtless many an equally Christlike life is spent in busy streets and amid purely urban surroundings. But here was one who seemed to reproduce the method of the Saviour's life. Peirce appeared to be patterned after Him who "went about doing good," who "had not where to lay His head." El Dorado county became to a grateful people a twentieth century Palestine hallowed by the footprints of a devoted follower of the Christ. This was the way they came to regard him, pointing him out as he passed by in his rough gray suit, woollen shirt and thick boots, with the words, "There goes a man like Jesus Christ."

Charles Caleb Peirce was born of Quaker parentage in Cincinnati, O., in 1826. His father, Thomas Peirce, was an iron merchant of Chester county, Pennsylvania. He studied and practised

law for a few years, but his gentle nature found the exercise of litigation distasteful, and he turned to the ministry of the Church. He was graduated from the General Theological Seminary in New York in the class of 1860, was ordered deacon in Trinity Church, New York, the same year and came at once to California, being moved with a yearning for the West. For some months he was in charge of Grace Church, San Francisco, while the Rev. Dr. F. C. Ewer, the rector, went East for a vacation from which he never returned. An incident occurred while here which gave direction to his whole subsequent life. A kind-hearted parishioner of worldly disposition said to him, "Mr. Peirce, if you would be a success in the ministry you must cultivate the rich, for money rules the world."

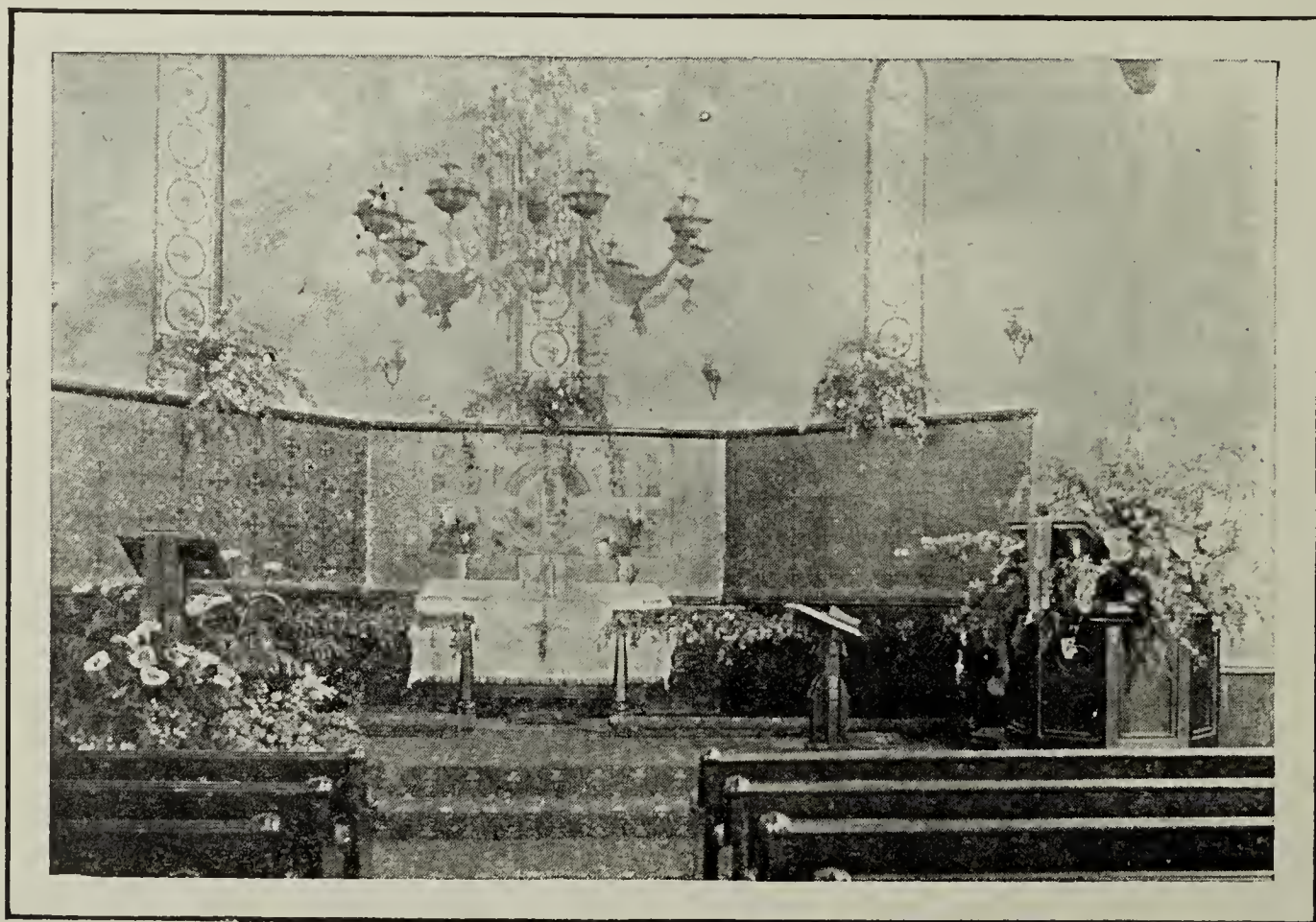
This sentiment, seriously expressed, shocked the sensitive spirit of young Peirce, whose heart was burning with ardent love and faith. He resolved to shake the dust of wealthy cities from



his feet and turn to some wilderness where he could throw himself altogether upon God. He selected El Dorado, as being a wild, half settled mining country without railroads. Thither he went in 1861 after his ordination to the priesthood. He resolved to demonstrate in his own experience the truth of the Saviour's promise: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." This was his Master's word and he believed it absolutely. Therefore he refused a salary, and would not on principle save any of the money which came into his hands. He argued, "If I were a man of family, I should feel compelled to look forward to provision for my wife and children, but I have only myself to provide for, and I will lean wholly on the Almighty arm." The accounts which he kept methodically showed that up to 1899 (when I had the privilege of examining his books) he had spent over \$16,000 on Bibles, religious writings and sacred pictures which he gave away. This sum represented the amount he had received from the people in fees and donations. He grudged every dollar spent on him-

self, and saved all that he earned that he might buy more books to give away. He indulged his own taste in one direction only. He secured the works of German and English scholars whom he thought able to elucidate the Hebrew and Greek Testaments in a reverent, orthodox spirit. Delitzsch was his favorite master. He was a close student of the letter of Scripture. His annotations in Hebrew are to be found on the margins of his Old Testament, and in both Testaments he was ever searching as in a mine for precious treasures. That the Bible was God's chief instrument of conversion was his conviction. Himself he likened to a wheel in a running stream, with an inexhaustible supply of Scripture passing through him to the people. Thus he became the incarnation of faith, and men looked on and marvelled. One day, walking with him on the road, he said to me with great earnestness, "Emmanuel is nearer than the air I breathe or the food I eat. The Saviour is the one great reality of life."

Wonderfully was his faith in God's providential care justified. The moment illness came upon him the people sur-



WHERE MR. PEIRCE MINISTERED



rounded him with comfort and skilled attention. Men who never suspected that they were fulfilling the word of Christ provided liberally for Christ's faithful servant. By whispering his name on the street, a thousand dollars might have been collected in an hour. He was sent away to the springs with an attendant. The nurse writes home: "This is an expensive place. Good people here will look after Brother Peirce. I can return and save you \$5 daily." The answer went by wire, "Stay with him, and spare no expense."

Peirce, although he knew that he must die, was the happiest of men, for had not the Saviour's promise proved true? "Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house or brethren . . . or wife or children or lands for My sake and the gospel's but he shall receive an hundred fold *now in this time*, houses and brethren . . . and lands, and in the world to come eternal life" (St. Mark x. 29, 30). He had nothing yet possessed all things. So he went away rejoicing in the expectation of meeting Christ face to face.

Within the limits of this article nothing can be written of the eccentricities which were a natural expression of his strong individuality; of his isolation from a former bishop and his clerical

brethren, so that he could not be persuaded to attend convocation or other gatherings; of his need of an associate to care for the flock at home, while he was ministering to the scattered sheep abroad. We must not miss, however, the magnificent witness of his life to the power of faith and the truth of Jesus Christ. The splendid breadth of his sympathy and labors makes our parochial systems, with their careful definitions of metes and boundaries, look petty, and he lived in happy forgetfulness of the column of statistics, as he went about touching and blessing every life he could in any wise approach. While others were discussing in Church Councils how to evangelize a rural community, he was simply doing it. His career gives a valuable hint to those who will receive it, that to be the American Church we must go out to the people, full of sympathy and service for all.

In the Book of Life, kept by the hand of the loving, eternal One, without doubt stands very high the name of the obscure presbyter, Charles Caleb Peirce. It may be that in this strong, spiritual personality the American Church has developed, in one of her mission fields, a character who will some day be recognized as one of the brightest lights of American Christianity.

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